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Holman Hamilton  
*University of Kentucky*

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## "This most unnecessary & senseless war": Zachary Taylor Writes from Mexico

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Holman Hamilton

The presidential election year of 1980 seems an appropriate time to congratulate the University of Kentucky on acquiring a highly significant original letter, connected with a White House campaign of long ago.

Zachary Taylor, who spent over half his life in Kentucky and lived here longer than any other chief executive, was within a few weeks of returning to the United States from the Mexican War when he sent this communication to his son-in-law, Dr. Robert C. Wood. Virtually all Taylor-to-Wood letters should be of absorbing interest to scholars because Major-General "Old Rough and Ready" Taylor esteemed and thoroughly trusted Ann Taylor Wood's husband. Taylor wrote to Wood from Mexico more often, more extensively, and more confidentially than to any other relative or friend.

No fewer than forty-three such personal documents, composed on or south of the Rio Grande, were owned early in the twentieth century by the St. Louis manufacturer William K. Bixby (1857-1931) and printed in a limited edition of *Letters of Zachary Taylor from the Battle-fields of the Mexican War* (Rochester, New York: Genesee Press, 1908).<sup>1</sup> The 12 October 1847 item not only eluded collector Bixby's grasp but is absent from the book he sponsored.

The letter is especially illuminating on account of Taylor's candor in giving his low opinion of the war that brought him fame. Frankness likewise characterizes the commander's comments on possible results of the struggle he helped win, as well as on the 1848 political contest in which he was irrevocably involved.<sup>2</sup>

Born in Orange County, Virginia, on 24 November 1784, Taylor had been brought to Jefferson County, Kentucky, when only eight months old. He continued living in the state until he entered the army in 1808, frequently returning to Kentucky thereafter either on duty or on leave.



Taylor first came to the country's attention in a dramatic way during the War of 1812 when, as a young captain, he successfully defended Fort Harrison on the Wabash River in Indiana Territory.<sup>3</sup> As a colonel he participated in both the Black Hawk War and the Second Seminole War, gaining the brevet of brigadier-general in Florida Territory after defeating Seminole and Mikasuki Indians in 1837 combat on the north shore of Lake Okeechobee. Most of the battle-hardened veteran's career, however, developed in periods of peace—which he assiduously sought to maintain. He served in the states or future states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Florida, Louisiana, Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas.

In the Mexican War, Taylor fought four battles—Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma against Mariano Arista, Monterey against Pedro de Ampudia, and Buena Vista against Antonio López de Santa Anna. General Taylor became tremendously well-regarded in the United States, partly because of his custom of coming out on top, and partly on account of his homespun personality.

Since Taylor had never had anything to do with civil government and had never voted, there naturally was doubt as to which political party he belonged to. In practical terms, such negative factors turned out to be assets from the standpoint of *availability*—that magic word so often a pivot of American politics. Playing his cards close to his chest, Taylor attracted the support of many independent voters and dissident Democrats as well as Whigs eager to find a winner for the upcoming presidential election of 1848.

At last, in April 1848, he asserted he was "a Whig but not an ultra Whig." This declaration probably was decisive in obtaining the Whig nomination. But, in the letter before us, we see the future president's thinking almost exactly half a year before—when it was still to his advantage to appeal to non-Whigs at least as much as to Whigs.

Dr. Wood, the letter's recipient, was born in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1800 and died in New York City in 1869. A doctor of medicine, he served in the army more than four decades. And, during the Civil War when both his sons sided with the Confederacy, Wood was assistant surgeon-general and for a time acting surgeon-general of the Union army. In 1865, he would receive the brevet of brigadier-general.

Wood and Taylor held each other in very high regard. In



addition to the two Wood sons, whose careers are briefly sketched in Notes 7 and 13, Taylor and Wood were progenitors of other prominent leaders. One of these, Zachary Taylor Wood, would become the military governor of the Yukon. And another, Stuart Taylor Wood, would head the Royal Canadian Mounted Police for a long period in the mid-twentieth century. These descendants were Canadians because John Taylor Wood (see Note 7) went into business in Halifax after Appomattox.

A final comprehensive point: the 12 October 1847 letter (like so many of Taylor's personal communications) reflects his strength of character, his convictions, and his downright nature; it also illustrates his deep interest in—and concern about—the members of his family. Family meant a great deal to "Old Zack." "Rough and Ready" he might be in the eyes of some observers. Yet to those who loved him, and who knew he loved them, he was benign *pater familias*.

It may also be worth mentioning that Dr. Wood was one of Taylor's medical advisers when the president was seriously ill in Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1849—and again when the twelfth chief executive died on the second floor of the Executive Mansion the night of 9 July 1850.<sup>4</sup>

Camp near Monterey<sup>4</sup> Mexico  
October 12th, 1847

My dear Doctor,

Your very welcome & acceptable letters of the 22d. & 25th. ulto. with one to you from Puss<sup>5</sup> & one from Dr. Henderson<sup>6</sup> inclosed, the latter in relation to John,<sup>7</sup> accompanied by several newspapers, with a number of slips cut from others containing articles [*for* articles] of much interest, has just reached me, for all of which you have my most cordial thanks; I hardly need say the gratification it afforded me, which was of no ordinary kind, to hear from you, & to learn notwithstanding your vicinity to the contagion as well as being in some measure mixed up with it,<sup>8</sup> you had escaped from its effects up to the time you wrote, & was then in your usual health, which I sincerely hope will long continue to be the case; at the same time, I cannot but feel great anxiety for your safety, & will



continue to do so, until you have a frost, which will put an end to the epidemic in the City & its vicinity, which I hope will be by the 26 inst. if not before; as well as to know that Mrs. Tay,<sup>9</sup> Ann,<sup>10</sup> Betty<sup>11</sup> the girls,<sup>12</sup> as well as John & Rob,<sup>13</sup> were all well when you last h[e]ard from them, I flatter myself the five first, will be able to return to their respective homes by the time this reaches you, as I know they must be all heartily tired by this time of the pass<sup>14</sup>—At the same time I hope they will not return until it is perfectly safe to do so; at any rate until they can pass through N. Orleans without danger, & it is perfectly healthy at B. Rouge; should the fever continue about N. Orleans & the Barracks, & it is healthy at B. Rouge<sup>15</sup> & they can get through the City, or around it, without danger, Ann & the girls had better go home with Mrs. Taylor & Betty, & remain with them until it is convenient & proper for them to join you; I hardly think Mrs. T—can be prevaile[d] on to stop at the Barracks more than a day or two, even if healthy there as she must be very anxious to get home; I think mor likely she would prefer returning & making you & Ann a visit after getting home, & seeing all was as it should be there—

I was very much pleased to find that John was about & had sailed under such favorable circumstances, & have but lit[tle] doubt if his health & life is spared, he will succeed in working his way to a highly & respectable position in the arm of the public service he has chosen as a profession;<sup>16</sup> his first voyage will be I apprehend the most trying period of the service, & if he passes through it with credit, which I hope he will do, he will hardly meet with obstactees [for obstacles] he cannot surmount with comparative ease to those which he has previously overcome—Ther is nothing like a young mans having a fair start, no matter what the business may be he engages in, which I think is Johns case, & has a prudent adviser which I trust will be the case in Mr. Forrest, the purser,<sup>17</sup> as well as others, which I hope he will profit by; it will depend on his own course & conduct to make friends & to keep them; if he has a fondness for study & will constantly improve his mind with useful knowledge by reading, without neglecting the duties of his profession, & without running into excesses of any kind, & can make out to live on his pay, he cannot fail to do well—I hope you have recently heard from Rob, & that he is settled down quietly at school,<sup>18</sup> & will remain & prosecute his studies as he should do, until you think proper to remove him—I was quite gratified with Pusses stile & execution in the way of letter writing, & I think you



are doing well to require her as well as Dump<sup>19</sup> to write a letter once every week to some one, whether at home, or elsewhere; as it not only is a very desirable as well as useful acquirement or accomplishment, for either male or female to write will [for well], & with facility. Dr. Hendersons course has placed John & his friends under great obligations, which I trust he & they will not forget—

I was much pleased to hear that his mother had received recently a letter from Dick dated at the White Sulphur Springs in Virginia & that his health had very much improved,<sup>20</sup> & most sincerely do I hope he will return with it nearly if not quite reinstated.

I regret to hear of the death of Capt. Fenner altho.<sup>21</sup> a stranger to me, or anyone else who have & may fall victims to this most unnecessary & senseless war,<sup>22</sup> which appears to me from the terms or basis for bringing about a pe[a]ce between the two Republics, offered by our govt. through Mr. Trist,<sup>23</sup> it is now & has been carried on barely to see how m[an]y of the enemy we could destroy, & the extent of country we could overrun, for more than twelve months past—For it now appears after the Mexicans were driven across the Rio Grande, & we took possession of New Mexico & Upper California, we had all the govt. requird & where we should have stopped, & held on to what we wanted; all we have done since, has been warring for a phantom, & those who have been the cause of its being carried on, are responsible for all the blood & treasure which has been expended since that time—I have heard nothing from the City of Mexico since I last wrote you; all we know here is, that our troops took possession of the City on the 14<sup>th</sup>. ulto.<sup>24</sup> but as to the particulars which occurred immediately before, or since, we know nothing—

In my last I remarked on the case of Majr. Sewell;<sup>25</sup> nor has anything occurred on reflection to change my opinion as then expressed; without any other but the kindest feelings towards the Majr, which I have ever entertained since my acquaintance with him; but thos relations can be changed into indifference should he wish it—

I got a letter from Col. Taylor<sup>26</sup> written since that of Dr. Wells<sup>27</sup> dated on board Steam Boat near the Mouth of Cumberland River, then on his way to Tenessee to provide subsistence for the two additional Regts. of Tenessee Volunteers recently called into service—He said nothing about returning to Mexico—There appears to be considerable changes among the officers of your dept. Kennedy<sup>28</sup> & Russell<sup>29</sup> have been quite fortunate—Col. Churchill<sup>30</sup>



appears to have his hands full, in mustering in Volunteers; Col. Croghan<sup>31</sup> could be very well spared from here, to aid him in that duty—I thank Dr. W<sup>32</sup>—for his kind regards which please communicate to him when you next write him, should you at any time do so—

I have thought, for some time & still do so that there would be a blow up between Genl. Scoot [for Scott], Mr. Trist & the administration, one of the two gentlemen named, will be held responsible by the powers that be, for the blundering armistice as it failed to bring about a peace;<sup>33</sup> let them I say fight it out, old "Harry"<sup>34</sup> take the hindmost, they are all of a piece, & would sacrifice each other or the country to gain their own selfish ends—

Every effort will be made by certain officers in the army who are so contemptable as to become the creature[s] of Worth,<sup>35</sup> who are ready to do his bidding at the expense of truth or decency, bribed by a glass of wine infamously obtained; I envy neither the puffer or the puffed—

I presume Genl. Patterson<sup>36</sup> has in this reached Vera Cruz, he will be second in command on that line on his arrival; I will take command as a matter of course of that column, should any accident befall Genl. Scott—

The next Presidential campaign as you say will not only be very exciting but very bitter; as I have on several occasions stated to you, I did not expect to see an individual elected to that office for many years from a Slave holding State, particularly a Slave holder, if ever; which opinion I can but entertain; I therefore do not look forward to reaching that high office; You will see many singular occurrences or I am very much mistaken,<sup>37</sup> in the way of maneuvering between this & the end of the next session of Congress to bring forward certain individuals prominently before the Nation for the office in question & every subject will be resorted to which has been before the Country, Banks, Tarifs, internal improvements, Wilmot proviso etc, & will be handled with ability & perseverance, to raise up some, and break down others—The ultra Whigs are hanging back in hopes they can again get Mr. Clay<sup>38</sup> before the country as a candidate for that office; While many of his heretofore bitterest opponents are very much astonished that the Whigs are deserting that great & good man, who could now be elected; which is all stuff; their object is too plain altho. it may succeed, which is to get me out of the way, or to divide the Whig party by bringing Mr. C—& myself or Mr. Clay singly before the Country; as they



are satisfied he cannot be elected; how far Mr. C—has or will give into this arrangement I am not prepared to say; of one thing I am certain which is, he has been very reserved as to his wishes in this matter—I shall hold my self aloof, & occupy & maintain a position which will not subject me either to mortification or disappointment should some other individual be placed in the presidential chair—I should not be surprised from the signes of the times, if the election of the next Chief Magistrate devolve on the House of Representatives<sup>39</sup>

I am very anxious for the time to arrive for the meeting of Congress, to see what course that body as well as the administration will take, in regard to this war; it is now evident we cannot without destroying the Constitution attach any territory to the U. States by treaty South of the Missouri Compromise time [for line]; two thirds of the Se[n]ate will not agree to it without the Wilmot proviso; nor will two thirds do so with it; I should like to know what we are fighting for, unless it is to array in deadly hostility one portion of the Union against the other;<sup>40</sup> in this state of things, it seems to me the sooner we take possession of a line that the North and the South can meet on & occupy it the better, withdrawing the whole of our people to it, or nort[h] of the same, and let the Mexicans drive us from it if they can do so; something of this kind must be done, or there is no telling what will be the result of the present contest, independent of the enormous debt which will be saddled on our Country—

I believe was the election for president to take place now, nothing would or could prevent my election, but as I have before stated many powerful efforts will be made by the wire pullers to c[h]ange public opinion between this & Novr. 1848, and I am prepared to see such a Change—

I have not written Mrs. Taylor or Betty by this Mail as I presume they will have left the pass<sup>41</sup> before one would have reached them at that place, & besides I had nothing new to communicate since I last wrote; you can let them know why I did not write—I have made the necessaray application to leave the country, & if granted I hope to be with you early in Decr. if not by the first; I shall leave here early in next month for Matamoros,<sup>42</sup> there to await the answer to my application, which may not be favorably acted on, & if they give me an army I am ready to lead it against the enemy in any direction the government may wish me to do so; I will not determine before han[d] what course I will pursue



if the indulgence asked for should be refused—My love to Ann & the children as well as regards to the boy when you write them, & wishing you all continued health & prosperity I remain

Truly & Sincerely  
Your Friend  
Z Taylor

Sergt. R C Wood  
U. S. Army  
N. Orlean Barracks N. Orleans

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The Margaret I. King Library holds Number 188 of the 300 copies "printed for private distribution only" and initialed by Bixby.

<sup>2</sup>The biographical and historical value of this and other 1846-1848 correspondence is enhanced by the paucity of Taylor's surviving private letters penned by him when president.

<sup>3</sup>An area now identified with Terre Haute, Indiana.

<sup>4</sup>Capital of the state of Nuevo Leon, Monterey was spelled with one "r" by Mexicans and Americans in the 1840s.

Zachary Taylor's punctuation and spelling are retained; where helpful, misspellings have been corrected in brackets. The many words deleted by Taylor are not indicated, since none appear to have significance.

Claire McCann, Curator of Manuscripts at King Library, graciously checked the transcript.

<sup>5</sup>"Puss" was one of Blandina Dudley Wood's nicknames. Another was "Nina." She was General Taylor's granddaughter and Dr. Wood's daughter. Her husbands would be Edward Boyce and Baron Guido von Grabow.

<sup>6</sup>Andrew A. Henderson, then an assistant surgeon in the navy.

<sup>7</sup>As fierce a fighter as his grandsire, John Taylor Wood (1830-1904) was Dr. and Mrs. Robert C. Wood's firstborn. Both a captain in the Confederate navy and a colonel in the Confederate army, he captured 32 northern vessels in a single month.

<sup>8</sup>In 1847, yellow fever killed some 2,700 people in New Orleans.

<sup>9</sup>Née Margarett Mackall (pronounced "Maykle") Smith, Mrs. Zachary Taylor was born in Maryland in 1788 and died in Mississippi in 1852. Jefferson County, Kentucky, was the scene of her 1810 wedding to the future general and president.

<sup>10</sup>Eldest child of the Zachary Taylors, Ann Mackall Taylor (1811-1875) was a native of Kentucky. At the age of 18, in the future state of Wisconsin, she became Dr. Wood's bride.



<sup>11</sup>The very attractive Mary Elizabeth ("Betty") Taylor was born in 1824 and died in 1909. Fourteen months after General Taylor wrote this letter, he gave her in marriage to his gifted wartime adjutant-general, William Wallace Smith ("Perfect") Bliss; her second husband was Philip Pendleton Dandridge. Because her mother was something of an invalid, Betty Bliss acted as White House hostess during her father's presidency.

<sup>12</sup>Blandina Dudley Wood and Sarah Knox Wood. See Notes 5 and 19.

<sup>13</sup>Robert C. Wood, Jr. (1832-1900), in 1850 was appointed to West Point by President Taylor. In his thirties, he served as a Confederate colonel.

<sup>14</sup>Pass Christian, Mississippi, on the gulf coast.

<sup>15</sup>Baton Rouge, Louisiana, was Taylor's place of residence. He customarily wrote "B. Rouge" for Baton Rouge; "N. Orleans" for New Orleans; "U. States" for United States, and so forth.

<sup>16</sup>John had entered the United States navy as a midshipman the preceding April.

<sup>17</sup>Samuel Forrest became a navy purser in October 1836.

<sup>18</sup>The 15-year-old Rob was something of a cutup at this stage of his adolescence.

<sup>19</sup>"Dump" or "Dumple" was Sarah Knox Wood, granddaughter of General Taylor and younger daughter of Dr. Wood. She was goddaughter of Jefferson Davis and was named in honor of her aunt, Davis's first wife.

<sup>20</sup>One of the most remarkable of all the Taylors, Richard (1826-1879) was Zachary's youngest child and only son. In 1847, he was suffering from what was called inflammatory rheumatism. Subsequently a cotton and sugar planter, author, linguist, and brilliant conversationalist, he would serve in distinguished style and with marked success in the Civil War. His final Confederate grade was lieutenant-general.

<sup>21</sup>A native of North Carolina, Robert Fenner died on 19 September 1847.

<sup>22</sup>It is revealing that a major hero of an important military conflict would describe in such derogatory terms the war that made him famous.

<sup>23</sup>Nicholas P. Trist (1800-1874) was the State Department agent whom President James K. Polk sent to Mexico to conclude the war. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) was the result.

<sup>24</sup>Winfield Scott (1786-1866), Taylor's arch rival, commanded the American forces occupying Mexico City on 14 September 1847. He was also the ranking general of the United States Army at the outbreak of the Civil War.

<sup>25</sup>Washington Seawell, a Virginian and West Point alumnus, had become a lineal major in March 1847.

<sup>26</sup>General Taylor's only living brother in 1847 was Joseph Pannill Taylor (1796-1864), then a lieutenant-colonel and eventually a Civil War U. S. brigadier-general.

<sup>27</sup>Identified with both Maryland and Georgia, John B. Wells was an assistant army surgeon and then a major surgeon from 1834 to 1853.

<sup>28</sup>A Kentuckian, Alfred W. Kennedy served as an assistant surgeon from 1840 until his death in 1851.

<sup>29</sup>The New York-born James W. Russell also was an assistant surgeon in the army, having that assignment from 1839 to 1853.

<sup>30</sup>Sylvester Churchill of Vermont was an army officer from 1812 to



1861. An inspector-general during his last 20 years, he won the brevet of brigadier-general for gallant and meritorious conduct in the battle of Buena Vista.

<sup>31</sup>Nephew and namesake of the famous George Rogers Clark, George Croghan (1791-1849) grew up at "Locust Grove" on the periphery of Louisville near Taylor's boyhood home. The hero of Fort Stephenson in the War of 1812, Croghan was now an army inspector-general.

<sup>32</sup>Dr. John B. Wells. See Note 25.

<sup>33</sup>For a fairly long period, this was Polk's attitude toward both Scott and Trist—who temporarily formed low opinions of each other.

<sup>34</sup>One of the popular or familiar names for the Devil in the north of England and elsewhere. Taylor seemed to enjoy consigning people he did not admire to Satan's custody.

<sup>35</sup>William Jenkins Worth (1794-1849), a general officer of ability in the Mexican War and a controversial figure, became a bitter foe of General Scott for whom Worth had named his son. The name was changed.

<sup>36</sup>An Irish-born Pennsylvanian, Robert Patterson (1792-1881) served in various military capacities during the War of 1812. He was a general officer in both the Mexican and Civil Wars, entering each from business life.

<sup>37</sup>Compare this statement with Taylor's later assertion: "I believe was the election for president to take place now, nothing would or could prevent my election, but . . . I am prepared to see . . . a change."

<sup>38</sup>The outstanding Whig statesman of the nation, Kentucky's adopted son Henry Clay (1777-1852) was born in Virginia. By 1847, his presidential hopes had been dashed four times. The next year, at a convention in Philadelphia, Taylor would defeat Clay, Scott, and Daniel Webster for the Whig nomination.

<sup>39</sup>This did not occur, as in November 1848 Taylor scored a clearcut electoral-college decision (163-127) over Democrat Lewis Cass of Michigan.

<sup>40</sup>Taylor's skepticism as to the Mexican War's purposes is in accord with his criticism covered by Note 20.

<sup>41</sup>Pass Christian. See Note 13.

<sup>42</sup>A Mexican city on the Rio Grande in the state of Tamaulipas.